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ABSTRACT

Not all of America's public schools have benefited from recent efforts to improve education, because the problems of schools and of their communities are deep and complex. By 2000, when one of every three pupils in the public schools will be nonwhite, America's major cities could become an educational Third World. To avoid a deepening crisis, Americans must recognize that poverty and malnutrition are connected to student performance. Schools must give top priority to early education, especially to language and, in particular, to the English language. Every school district should organize a primary school unit called the Basic School. The goals of the Basic School would be to assure that every child reads with understanding, writes with clarity, and effectively speaks and listens. Basic School grade levels would be blurred, class size would be small, the school schedule would conform to changing family and work patterns, and the school would offer prekindergarten programs, after-hour workshops, and summer sessions. New enrichment programs financed by parents and the State, called the Extended School, would supplement the Basic School and provide extra services for special and at-risk children. Generally, schools should also broaden their criteria for student potential, while researchers deepen and extend their studies of children's intelligence and how they learn. (RH)

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The Early Years and the Nation's Future

Ernest L. Boyer

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Indeed, I'm convinced that if we would give as much status to first-grade teachers as we give to full professors, that one act alone would go a long way to bring excellence to the nation's schools.

The Early Years and the Nation's Future

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INTRODUCTION

Forty months ago the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared, "our Nation is at risk," and said that, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves."

Since that hyperbole hit the headlines education has been a high priority in the nation.

- Thirty governors have named school reform commissions.
- Legislators have enacted programs.
- The corporate sector has adopted schools.
- College presidents have been outspoken for public education.
- Graduation requirements have been raised.
- Teacher salaries have increased at twice the inflation rate. And there has been a dramatic turnaround in the public attitude toward teachers.

For decades, teachers in this country have been portrayed as ill-prepared, self-serving people who care less about students than about salary increments and summers off.

Today, they are increasingly being viewed as part of the solution, not the problem.

In sum, we've had, during the past three years, more constructive action on behalf of public education than during any comparable period in recent memory. And I propose two cheers for the current push for school renewal.

Still, I see a dark lining to the silver cloud.

While "advantaged" schools are getting better, many others—specially those in our major cities—remain deeply troubled institutions. These schools differ not just in degree, but in *kind*. The social pathologies that surround them are so great and the problems so complex that current efforts are just not adequate to the task.

Twenty years ago, there was a crusade in this nation to improve urban education. The centerpiece of the plan was desegregation. Elaborate "remedies" were drawn and agonizing battles were fought out in the courts—and sometimes in the streets.

Today, the crusade of the 1960s, which is but a faded memory, has been followed—not with new ideas—but with disillusionment and neglect.

- In some city high schools, at least four out of ten students are absent on any given day. How are we to achieve excellence when students aren't even in the building?
- Almost half of the Mexican-American and Puerto Rican students who enroll in public schools drop out before they are awarded a diploma.
- In Philadelphia the dropout rate is 38 percent. And in Boston it's 43 percent.
- In Chicago, in 1984, over half of the students failed to graduate, and of those that did only a third were reading at the twelfth-grade level.
- Last year—in the Cleveland Public Schools—there was not a single semi-finalist in the National Merit Scholarship competition. Boston and Detroit each had only *one* high school with semi-finalists.

What's disturbing is that the school reform movement is not confronting adequately the core of our educational dilemma. And there is still an enormous gap between our rhetoric and results.

The breakup of the home, the community wrenched by crime, lack of money, loss of good teachers—all of these threaten to overwhelm our most troubled schools.

To require a failing student in an urban ghetto to take another unit in math or foreign language without a better climate or better teaching is like raising a hurdle without giving more coaching to someone who has already stumbled.

And all this is occurring at the very time the problems are expanding.

By the year 2000, America will be a nation in which one of every three pupils in the public schools will be nonwhite. What is coming toward the educational system is a group of children who will be poorer, more ethnically and linguistically diverse, children who will have more handicaps that surely will affect their schooling.

Unless we deepen our commitment, the crisis in urban education will increase. An aging white population will reduce support, and the gap will widen between the haves and the have nots in education.

What we could be left with in our major cities is a kind of *educational Third World*. And it is here, in these schools, that the battle of American education will be won or lost. If urban schools do not become a national priority, the promise of excellence will remain sadly unfulfilled.

There are no panaceas. If there were obvious answers to the problems of urban education—we would have found them long ago. What is clear, however, is that our efforts must begin before failure has become a way of life.

Without taking educators off the hook, our first obligation is to recognize that poverty and schooling are connected. And that what we see as poor performance may be connected to events that precede schooling—and even birth itself.

The growing fetus requires a diet rich in protein, vitamins, and minerals. And yet most poor mothers do not have adequate nutrition.

Further, the human brain grows most rapidly during the first year of life. And yet today 40 percent of all the people in America classified as poor—are children. And malnutrition affects almost a half-million children in this nation. The implications for schooling are dramatic.

A major report by the Physicians Task Force on Hunger in America revealed that the child, deprived of adequate nutrition during critical years of brain growth, risks "cognitive deficits," to quote the panel—which obviously restrict learning later on. And in a recent Louisiana study, poor children who had been provided food supplements during pregnancy and the first year of life were compared to those who had been nutritionally denied. The children, who had received good nutrition early showed higher IQ, higher attention span, and higher grades in school.

And yet, it's ironic that at the very time when better schools are being pushed, funds for the federal child nutrition programs are restricted.

I realize that to talk about babies and poor health may appear to be far off the school reform agenda. And yet the evidence is overwhelming. Our educational problems cannot be divorced from the problems of the poor. All mothers and young children must have good nutrition if good schooling is our goal.

Coming directly to troubled schools, I'm also convinced that we must give top priority to early education—and especially to language—a commitment strongly reaffirmed by Secretary Bennett just this week.

I propose that every school district—certainly those

with a high dropout rate—organize what might be called *The Basic School*—a unit that would include kindergarten through grade three.

The Basic School would focus on the centrality of language. And in our society, English must come first. The sending and receiving of messages makes us truly human. Language is imprinted in the genes and by the time the child marches off to school, he or she is already linguistically empowered with a vocabulary of several thousand words. Any child who can speak and listen, I believe, can also be taught to read and write.

The goal of the Basic School would be to build on this foundation; to assure that every child reads with understanding, writes with clarity, and effectively speaks and listens. It would be a school saturated with rich language. Children, from their first entry, would be speaking, writing, reading, talking about words, listening to stories, building a vocabulary, becoming linguistically empowered. If children do not gain a fundamental grasp of language in the early years it is almost impossible for them fully to compensate for the failure later on. It's like playing tennis with a broken racquet.

Further, in these early years, rigid grade levels should be blurred. It's foolish for teachers to fret over the curious question of whether to "fail" a student in grade one or two. Some children develop more slowly than others, and whether a student is in first grade or second grade is inconsequential. What is important is not the age, but the linguistic progress of each child.

The goal is to make sure that students will be reading and writing with confidence and handling math accurately before they move to the next level—where the focus will be on the core of common learning. This is the only way to assure that students in the upper grades will academically succeed.

In the Basic School, class size is also crucial. Today primary school teachers sometimes have 30 or more students in a single class. Even under the best of conditions these teachers can give only a minute or two to each child in any given hour. This is simply not enough.

- The State of Indiana recently compared the achievements of first graders in large classes with those in classes with less than 20 students. The evidence was overwhelming. Small classes bring more academic gains.
- This nation should move quickly to implement the recent Governors' Report, *Time for Results*, that recommended one teacher for every 15 students in kindergarten through grade three. The Governors got it right. Smaller classes mean more money.

And yet, recent polls show that Americans are willing to spend more for education if they feel the investment will pay off. Further, it's my faith that a good Basic School

would reduce the high cost of special and remedial education in high school—which is expanding at an alarming rate.

The recent *High Scope* study of the long-term impact of quality early education concluded that for every dollar invested, the payoff is more than four to one.

I'm talking about reordering the educational priorities of the nation by giving more support to early education and more backing to primary school teachers.

Indeed, I'm convinced that if we would give as much status to first-grade teachers as we give to full professors, that one act alone would go a long way to bring excellence to the nation's schools.

But teachers cannot do the job alone. Schools need outstanding principals. And parents also must be partners in the process. Children are not likely to become good readers if no one reads at home, if "bookshelves" are filled only with knickknacks and plastic flowers, and if TV watching is the preoccupation of parents every night.

To reaffirm this partnership I'd like to see parents turn off the TV—even pass up "Dynasty" and "Dallas" now and then—to read aloud to children, and rediscover the beauty of the written and the spoken word.

This leads to priority number three.

To strengthen education we also must adjust the school schedule to the changing family and work patterns in the nation—a challenge that goes far beyond the crisis of the poor.

Grandfather Boyer was born in 1872. He died one month short of his 100th year, and during the century of his life the world became a wholly different place—from his horse drawn plow to John Glenn's lift-off into space.

Grandpa had grown up on a southwest Ohio farm. One day, when he was 96, I asked him about the schooling he had had. Grandpa said he went to school three years—long enough to learn to read and write. He walked six miles to school, and went only in the winter when he was not needed on the farm.

When today's school calendar was set almost a century ago—with nine months of study and three months off—over 90 percent of all school aged children were, like Grandpa Boyer, living on a farm with mother and father, working hard, and staying home in the summer to "tend the crops." The school calendar mirrored the work and family patterns of the nation.

Today, the world has turned upside down. Less than 3 percent of today's families are on farms. In most households both parents work—*away* from home.

Further, nearly one in five families is now headed by a woman. And two-thirds of these mothers work. About half the children now in first grade will have lived in one-

parent homes by the time they graduate from high school.

I'm convinced that, once again, the school schedule and the family schedule should be merged. It's essential that school arrangements match the realities of both family life and work patterns, as they did 100 years ago.

Already, because of working parents, over 40 percent of the nation's children are in *pre*-kindergarten programs. And I predict that increasingly schools will be called upon to provide pre-kindergarten sessions to serve young children who need care outside the home.

In fact, the Governors, in their new report, urged states to provide quality early education for "at risk" four-year-olds and "where possible" for three-year-olds as well. This recommendation touches the realities of life.

Another issue. Today, one out of ten children now comes home to an empty house or apartment. And as this "latchkey" problem grows, schools will operate on a longer day, offering after-hour programs such as special studies in science, computers, music, or athletics, for example.

Looking down the road, I'm also convinced that the school calendar will be lengthened. A three-month summer recess made sense when there were crops to be tended and extra hands were needed in the fields. But it's an anachronism now, especially at a time when most parents work outside the home, year round.

We need an optional summer term for children, not for babysitting but for learning. Their needs cannot be magically turned off when school is out.

Here, then, is the pattern I see emerging—pre-kindergarten programs, after-hour workshops, and summer sessions—all to fit the realities of family life and the needs of the children.

The danger is that affluent families will find their own services—summer camps, private lessons, youth clubs, for example—while poor children are allowed to drift.

In 1983, 53 percent of upper and middle income families had their preschool children in special programs, only 29 percent of at-risk three- and four-year-olds were so enrolled.

If this gap is to be narrowed, new enrichment programs—which I wish to call an *Extended School*—should be optionally available to serve *all* students, not just the privileged few.

Families who can pay for these extra services should pay for them—at fees that will make the activities self-supporting. For those who *cannot* afford the cost, I urge a state-financed plan that would give poor families a certificate of eligibility—linked to the Federal Chapter 1

guidelines—to be redeemed at the preschool, after-school, or summer program of their choice.

There is, in fact, precedent for this procedure. Today several states—New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina—have state financed enrichment programs where the eligibility is based on Chapter 1. While the focus of these projects is on remediation, the procedure could be applied for the Extended School as well.

Further, by financing this enrichment program—through parent payment—and through the state, local budgets would be relieved and more equity in public school financing would be assured. For the core school program, however, current funding patterns would be kept in place.

Incidentally, a school district could contract for these enrichment seminars—with a college or a youth club or local artists or computer centers, for example.

Further, there would be an advantage, I believe, in having children from all social and economic backgrounds—and perhaps from both public and private schools—participating together in the new enrichment programs.

This brings me to priority number four. In the days ahead it is urgently important that we learn more about *how* children learn.

Today, with all the talk about education, we know far too little about learning and we are far too ignorant about how to measure the results. We have good schools and good teachers, but my optimism about the future of schooling is based on the conviction that, in the days ahead, we will become much more knowledgeable about learning and about how the potential of all children can be assessed.

The most exciting work, in my opinion, is being done by Howard Gardner at Harvard. Gardner in his provocative and insightful book, *Frames of Mind*, reminds us that children have not only verbal intelligence—they also have logical intelligence, mathematical intelligence, spatial intelligence, bodily and personal intelligence. And I suspect intuitive and social intelligence as well.

Gardner suggests that we should find ways to understand the many dimensions of intelligence in our children. And yet today's paper and pencil tests focus on a limited range of verbal skills and on computation—on a meager sampling of selected words and numbers. We need yardsticks to assure that our 140 billion dollar annual investment in public schools is paying off. And today tests are useful in providing a barometer of how well schools are doing.

But our tests do not come close enough to individual children or provide sufficient information to the teachers. And by reducing students to a number we may tell children they are failures before they've discovered what they might become.

If our goal is to educate all children we must broaden our definition of potential and honor the full range of talent that contributes to our civility and perhaps to our survival, too.

James Agee wrote on one occasion that

> with every child who is born,
> under no matter what circumstance,
> the potentiality of the human race is born again.

Here then is my conclusion. To achieve excellence in education we must

- Confront the problems of poor children.
- Give priority to early education.
- Affirm the centrality of language.
- Provide enrichment programs that reflect the changing work and family patterns of the nation.
- And learn more about how children learn.

As we move toward the year 2000, the most urgent issue we confront is this: Will America continue to believe in education for all children or will it sort out schooling between the winners and the losers—and in so doing become a separated and more divided nation?

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